The Fighting Chance.

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cnier take Howard Quarrier?"

"Amen! Come on, race."

She gathered bridle. "Do you suppose Stephen Siward is going to make trouble?"

"How can he unless she helps him? Nonsense! All's well with Siward and Sylvia. Shall we gallop?"

All was very well with Siward and Sylvia. They had passed the rabbit brier country scathless, with two black mallard, a jack snipe and a rabbit to the credit of their score, and were now advancing through that dimly lit enchanted land of tall gray alders where in the sudden twilight of the leaves woodcock after woodcock fluttered upward twittering, only to stop and drop, transformed at the vicious crack of Siward's gun to fluffy balls of feather whirling earthward from midair.

Sagamore came galloping back with a soft, unsoiled mass of chestnut and brown feathers in his mouth. Siward took the dead cock, passed it back to the keeper who followed them, patted the beautiful, eager dog and signaled him forward once more.

"You should have fired that time," he said to Sylvia—"that is, if you care to kill anything."

"But I don't seem to be able to," she said. "It isn't a bit like shooting at clay targets. The twittering whir takes me by surprise—it's all so charmingly sudden—and my heart seems to stop in one beat, and I look and look, and then, whisk, and woodcock is gone, leaving me breathless."

Her voice ceased. The white setter, cutting up his ground ahead, had stopped, rigid, one leg raised, jaws quivering and locking alternately.

"Isn't that a stunning picture?" said Siward in a low voice. "What a beauty he is—like a statue in white and blue veined marble. You may talk, Miss Landis; woodcock don't flush at the sound of the human voice as grouse do."

"See his brown eyes roll back at us' He wonders why we don't do something!" whispered the girl. "Look, Mr Siward! Now his head is moving, oh, so gradually to the left!"

"The bird is moving on the ground," nodded Siward. "Now the bird has stopped."

"I do wish I could see a woodcock on the ground," she breathed. "Do you think we might by any chance?"

Siward noiselessly sank to his knees and crouched, keen eyes minutely busy among the shadowy browns and grays of wet earth and withered leaf, and after awhile cautiously he signaled the girl to kneel beside him and stretched out one arm, forefinger extended.

"Sight straight along my arm," he said, "as though it were a rifle barrel."

Her soft cheek rested against his shoulder, a stray strand of shining hair brushing his face.

"Under that bunch of fern," he whispered, "just the color of the dead leaves. Do you see? Don't you see that big woodcock squatted flat, bill pointed straight out and resting on the leaves?"

After a long while she saw suddenly, and an exquisite little shock tightened her fingers on Siward's extended arm.

"Oh, the feathered miracle!" she whispered. "The wonder of its cleverness to hide like that! You look and look and stare, seeing it all the while and not knowing that you see it. Then in a flash it is there, motionless, a brown shaped shadow among shadows. The dear little thing! Mr. Siward, do you think—are you going to"—

"No, I won't shoot it."

"No, I won't shoot it."

"Thank you. Might I sit here a moment to watch it?"

She seated herself soundlessly among the dead leaves. He sank into place beside her, laying his gun aside.

"Rather rough on the dog," he said, with a grimace.

"I know. It is very good of you, Mr. Siward, to do this for my pleasure. Oh—h! Do you see? Oh, the little beauty!"

The woodcock had risen, plumage puffed out, strutting with wings bowed and tail spread, facing the dog. The sudden pygmy defiance thrilled her. "Brave, brave!" she exclaimed, enraptured, but at the sound of her voice the bird crouched like a flash, large dark liquid eyes shining, long bill pointed straight toward them.

"He'll fly the way his bill points," said Siward. "Watch!"

He rose. She sprang lightly to her feet. There came a whirring flutter, a twittering shower of sweet notes, soft wings beating almost in their very faces, a distant shadow against the sky, and the woodcock was gone.

Quieting the astounded dog, gun cradled in the hollow of his left arm, he turned to the girl beside him. "That sort of thing wins no cups," he said.

"It wins something else, Mr. Siward—my very warm regard for you."

"There is no choice between that and the Shotover cup," he admitted, considering her.

"I—do you mean it?"

"Of course I do!"

"Then you are much nicer than I thought you. And, after all, if the price of a cup is the life of that brave little bird I had rather shoot clay pigeons. Now you will scorn me, I suppose. Begin!"

"My ideal woman has never been a life taker," he said coolly. "Once when I was a boy there was a girl, very lovely, my first sweetheart. I saw her at the traps once just after she had killed her seventh pigeon straight, 'pulling it down' from overhead, you know, very clever. The little thing was breathing on the grass, and it made sounds"— He shrugged and walked on. "She killed her twenty-first bird straight. It was a handsome cup too."

And after a silence, "So you didn't love her any more, Mr. Siward?" mockingly sweet.

They laughed, and at the sound of laughter the tall stemmed alders echoed with the rushing roar of a cock grouse thundering skyward. Crack! Crack! Whirling over and over through a cloud of floating feathers, a heavy weight struck the springy earth. There lay the big mottled bird, splendid silky ruffs spread, dead eyes closing, a single tiny crimson bead twinkling like a ruby on the gaping beak.

"Dead!" said Siward to the dog who had dropped to shot. "Fetch!" And, signaling the boy behind, he relieved the dog of his burden and tossed the dead weight of ruffled plumage toward him. Then he broke his gun, and as the empty shells flew rattling backward slipped in fresh cartridges, locked the barrels and walked forward, the flush of excitement still staining his sunburned face.

"You deal death mercifully," said the girl in a low voice. "I wonder what your ci-devant sweetheart would think of you."

"A bungler had better stick to the traps," he assented, ignoring the badinage.

"I am wondering," she said thoughtfully, "what I think of men who kill."

He turned sharply, hesitated, shrugged. "Wild things' lives are brief at best—fox or flying tick, wet nests or mink, owl, hawk, weasel or man. But the death man deals is the most merciful. Besides," he added, laughing, "ours is not a case of sweethearts."

"My argument is purely in the abstract, Mr. Siward. I am asking you whether the death men deal is more justifiable than a woman's gift of death."

"Oh, well, life taking, the giving of life—there can be only one answer to the mystery, and I don't know it," he replied, smiling.

"I do."

"Tell me, then, he said," still amused.

They had passed swale after swale of silver birches, waist deep in perfumed fern and brake. The big timber lay before them. She moved forward, light gun swung easily across her leather padded shoulder, and on the wood's sunny edge she seated herself, straight young back against a giant pine, gun balanced across her flattened knees.

"You are feeling the pace a little," he said, coming up and standing in front of her.

"The pace? No, Mr. Siward."

She sat, bright head pillowed in her arms, idly attentive to his low running comment on beast and bird and tree, on forest stillness and forest sounds, on life and the wild laws of life and death governing the great out world 'twixt sky and earth.

Somewhere in the woodland world the crows were holding a noisy session, and she told him that was the jury debating the degree of his guilt in killing the birds.

"Because you're guilty, of course," she continued. "I wonder what your sentence is to be?"

"I'll leave it to you," he suggested lazily.

"Suppose I sentenced you to slay no more?"

"Oh, I'd appeal"—

"No use. I am the tribunal of last resort."

"Then I throw myself upon the mercy of the court."

"You do well, Mr. Siward. This court is very merciful. How much do you care for bird murder? Very much? Is there anything you care for more? Yes? And could this court grant it to you in compensation?"

He said deliberately, roused by the level challenge of her gaze, "The court is incompetent to compensate the prisoner or offer any compromise."

"Why, Mr. Siward?"

"Because the court herself is already compromised in her future engagements."

"But what has my engagement to do with"—

"You offered compensation for depriving me of my shooting. There could be only one adequate compensation."

"And that?" she asked, coolly enough.

"Your continual companionship."

"But you have it, Mr. Siward."

"I have it for a day. The season lasts three months, you know."

"And you and I are to play a continuous vaudeville for three months? Is that your offer?"

"Partly."

"Then one day with me is not worth those many days of murder?" she asked in pretended astonishment.

"Ask yourself why those many days would be doubly empty," he said, so seriously that the pointless game began to confuse her.

"Then"—she turned lightly from uncertain ground—"then perhaps we had better be about that matter of the cup you prize so highly. Are you ready, Mr. Siward? There is much to be killed yet, including time, you know."

"I am not sure," he reflected, "just exactly what I should ask of you if you insist on taking away"—he turned and looked about him through the burnt gold foliage—"if you took away all this out of my life."

"I shall not take it, because I have nothing in exchange to offer, you say," she answered imprudently.

"I did not say so," he retorted.

"You did, reminding me that the court is already engaged for a continuous performance."

"Was it necessary to remind you?" he asked, with deliberate malice.

She flushed up, vexed, silent, then looked directly at him with beautiful hostile eyes. "What do you mean, Mr. Siward? Are you taking our harmless, idle badinage as warrant for an intimacy unwarranted?"

"Have I offended?" he asked, so impassively that a flash of resentment brought her to her feet, angry and self possessed.

"How far have we to go?" she asked quietly.

He rose to his feet, turned, hailing the keeper, repeating the question. And at the answer they both started forward, the dog ranging ahead through a dense growth of beech and chestnut, over a high brown ridge, then down, always down along a leafy ravine to the water's edge—a forest pond set in the gorgeous foliage of ripening maples.

"I don't see," said Sylvia impatiently, "how we are going to obey instructions and go straight ahead. There must be a stupid boat somewhere!"

But the game laden keeper shook his head, pulled up his hip boots, and pointed out a line of alder poles set in the water to mark a crossing.

"Am I expected to wade?" asked the girl anxiously.

"This here," observed the keeper, "is one of the most sportin' courses on the estate. Last season I seen Miss Page go through it like a scared deer—the young lady, sir, that took last season's cup"—in explanation to Siward, who stood doubtfully at the water's edge, looking back at Sylvia.

Bearing the girl between them, they waded out.

Raising her dismayed eyes she encountered his; there was a little laugh between them. She stepped daintily across the stones to the water's edge, instinctively gathering her kilts in one hand.

"Miles and I could chair you over," suggested Siward.

"Is that fair—under the rules?"

"Oh, yes, miss, as long as you go straight," said the keeper.

So they laid aside the guns and the guide's gamesack, and formed a chair with their hands, and, bearing the girl between them, they waded out along the driven alder stakes, knee deep in brown water.

Her arm, lightly resting around his neck, tightened a trifle as the water rose to his thighs; then the faint pressure relaxed as they thrashed shoreward through the shallows, ankle deep once more, and landed among the dry reeds on the farther bank.

Miles, the keeper, went back for the guns. Siward stamped about in the sun, shaking the drops from waterproof breeches and gaiters, only to be half drenched again when Sagamore shook himself vigorously.

"I suppose," said Sylvia, looking sideways at Siward, "your contempt for my sporting accomplishments has not decreased. I'm sorry. I don't like to walk in wet shoes even to gain your approval."

And as the keeper came splashing across the shallows: "Miles, you may carry my gun. I shall not need it any longer."

The upward roar of a bevy of grouse drowned her voice. Poor Sagamore, pointing madly in the blackberry thicket all unperceived, cast a dismayed glance aloft where the sunlit air quivered under the winnowing rush of heavy wings. Siward flung up his gun, heading a big quartering bird. Steadily the glittering barrels swept in the arc of fire, hesitated, wavered, then the possibility passed. The young fellow lowered the gun slowly, gravely, stood a moment motionless with bent head until the rising color in his face had faded.

And that was all for awhile. The astonished and disgusted keeper stared into the thicket. The dog lay quivering, impatient for signal. Sylvia's heart, which had seemed to stop with her voice, silenced in the gusty thunder of heavy wings, began beating too fast. For the ringing crack of a gun shot could have spoken no louder to her than the glittering silence of the suspended barrels nor any promise of his voice sound as the startled stillness sounded now about her, for he had made something a trifle more than mere amends for his rudeness. He was overdoing everything a little.

He stood on the thicket's edge, absently unloading the weapon, scarcely understanding what he had done and what he had not done.

A moment later a far hail sounded across the uplands, and against the sky figures moved distantly.

"Alderdene and Marion Page," said Siward. "I believe we lunch yonder, do we not, Miles?"

They climbed the hill in silence, arriving after a few minutes to find others already at luncheon—the Page boys, eager, enthusiastic, recounting adventure by flood and field; Rena Bonnesdel, tired and frankly bored and decorated with more than her share of mud; Eileen Shannon, very pretty, very effective, having done more execution with her eyes than with the dainty fowling piece beside her.

Marion Page nodded to Sylvia and Siward with a crisp, businesslike question or two, then went over to inspect their bag, nodding approbation as Miles laid the game on the grass.

"Eight full brace," she commented. "We have five and an odd cock pheasant—from Black Fells, I suppose. The people to our left have been blazing away like Coney Island, but Rena's guide says the ferns are full of rabbits that way, and Major Belwether can't hit fur afoot. You," she added frankly to Siward, "ought to take the cup. The birches ahead of you are full of woodcock. If you don't Howard Quarrier will. He's into a flight of jack snipe, I hear."

Siward's eyes had suddenly narrowed; then he laughed, patting Sagamore's cheeks. "I don't believe I shall shoot very steadily this afternoon," he said, turning toward the group at luncheon under the trees. "I wish Quarrier well with the cup."

"Nonsense!" said Marion Page curtly. "You are the cleanest shot I ever knew." And she raised her glass to him frankly and emptied it with the precision characteristic of her: "Your cup! With all my heart!"

"I also drink to your success, Mr. Siward," said Sylvia in a low voice, lifting her champagne glass in the sunlight. "To the Shotover cup—if you wish it."

In the little gust of hand clapping and laughter he turned again to Sylvia smilingly, saying under his breath, "As though winning the cup would compensate me now for losing it!"

She leaned involuntarily nearer, "You mean that you will not try for it?"

"Yes."

"That is not fair to me!"

"Why not?"

"Because—because I do not ask it of you."

"You need not, now that I know your wish."

"Mr. Siward, I—my—wish"—

But she had no chance to finish. Already Rena Bonnesdel was looking at them, and there was a hint of amused surprise in Eileen Shannon's mischievous eyes, averted instantly, with malicious ostentation.

Then Marion Page took possession of him so exclusively, so calmly, that something in her cool certainty vaguely irritated Sylvia, who had never liked her. Besides, the girl showed too plainly her indifference to other people, which other people seldom find amusing.

"Stephen," called out Alderdene anxiously counting the web loops in his khaki vest, "what do you call fair shooting at these ruffed grouse? You needn't be civil about it, you know."

"Five shells to a bird is good shooting," answered Siward. "Don't you think so, Miss Page?"

"You have a better score, Mr. Siward," said Marion Page, with a hostile glance at Alderdene, who had not made good. Impatient to start, she had turned her tailor made back to the company and was instructing his crestfallen lordship very plainly: "You fire too quickly, Blinky. Two seconds is what you must count when a grouse flushes. You must say, 'Mark, right,' or 'Mark, left, bang!'"

And so the luncheon party, lord and lady, twins and maidens, guides and dogs, trailed away across the ridge, distant silhouettes presently against the sky, then gone. And after a little while the far dry, accentless report of smokeless powder announced that the opening of the season had been resumed and the birds were dying fast in the glory of a perfect day.

"Are you ready, Mr. Siward?" she stood waiting for him at the edge of the thicket. Miles resumed his game sack and her fowling piece. The dog came up, looking him anxiously in the eyes.

So he walked forward beside her into the dappled light of the thicket.

Within a few minutes the dog stood twice, and twice the whirring twitter of woodcock startled her, echoed by the futile crack of his gun.

"Beg pardon, sir."

"Yes, Miles," with a glint of humor.

"Overshot, sir, excusin' the liberty, Mr. Siward. Both marked down forty yard to the left if you wish to start 'em again."

"Miles," he said, "my nerve is gone. Such things happen. I'm all in. Come over here, my friend, and look at the sun with me."

The disconfited keeper obeyed.

"Where ought that refulgent luminary to scintillate when I face Osprey Ledge?"

"Sir?"

"The sun. How do I hold it?"

"On the p'int of your right shoulder, sir. You ain't quittin', Mr. Siward, sir!" anxiously. "That Shotover cup is easy yours, sir!" eagerly. "Wot's a miss on a old drummer, Mr. Siward? Wot's twice overshootin' cock, s', when a blind dropper can see you are the cleanest, fastest, hard shootin' shot in the hull county?"

But Siward shook his head, with an absent glance at the dog, and motioned the astonished keeper forward.

"Line the easiest trail for us," he said. "I think we are already a trifle tired. Twigs will do in short cover. Use a hatchet in the big timber. And go slow till we join you."

And when the unwilling and perplexed keeper had started, Siward, unlocking his gun, drew out the smooth yellow cartridges and pocketed them.

Sylvia looked up as the sharp metallic click of the locked breech rang out in the silence.

"Mr. Siward!" in quick displeasure.

"Yes?"

"What you do for your amusements cannot concern me."

"Right, as usual," he said, so gayly that a reluctant smile trembled on her lips.

"Then why have you done this? It is unreasonable if you don't feel as I do about killing things that are having a good time in the world."

He stood silent, absently looking at the fowling piece cradled in his left arm. "Shall we sit here a moment and talk it over?" he suggested listlessly.

Her blue gaze swept him. His vague smile was indifferently bland.

"If you are determined not to shoot we might as well start for Osprey Ledge," she suggested. "Otherwise, what reason is there for our being here together, Mr. Siward?"

Awaiting his comment, perhaps expecting a counter proposition, she leaned against the tree beside which he stood, and after awhile, as his absent-minded preoccupation continued:

"Do you think the leaves are dry enough to sit on?"

He slipped off his shooting coat and placed it at the base of the tree. She seated herself, and, as he continued to remain standing, she stripped off her shooting gloves and glanced up at him inquiringly. "Well, Mr. Siward, I am literally at your feet."

"Which redresses the balance a little," he said, finding a place near her.

He sat there, chin propped on his linked fingers, elbows on knees and, though there was always the hint of a smile in his pleasant eyes, always the indefinable charm of breeding in voice and attitude, something now was lacking. And after a moment she concluded that it was his attention. Certainly his wits were woolgathering again. His eyes, edged with the shadow of a smile, saw far beyond her, far beyond the sunlit shadows where they sat.

In his preoccupation she had found him negatively attractive. She glanced at him now from time to time, her eyes returning always to the beauty of the subdued light where all about them silver stemmed birches clustered like slim shining pillars crowned with their autumn canopy of crumpled gold.

"Enchantment!" she said under her breath. "Surely an enchanted sleeper lies here somewhere."

"You," he observed, "unawakened."

"Asleep? I?" She looked around at him. "You are the dreamer here. Your eyes are full of dreaming even now. What is your desire?"

He leaned on one arm, watching her. She had dropped her ungloved hand, searching among the newly fallen gold of the birch leaves drifted into heaps. On the third finger a jewel glittered. He saw it, conscious of its meaning, but his eyes followed the hand idly heaping up autumn gold—a white slim hand, smoothly fascinating. Then the little restless hand swept near to his, almost touching it, and then instinctively he took it in his own curiously, lifting it a little to consider its nearer loveliness. Perhaps it was the unexpectedness of it, perhaps it was sheer amazement, that left her hand lying idly relaxed like a white petaled blossom in his.

After a little while the consciousness of the contact disconcerted her. She withdrew her fingers, with an involuntary shiver.

"Is there no chance for me, Miss Landis?"

The very revulsion of self possession returning chilled her; then anger came quick and hot; then pride. She deliberated, choosing her words coolly enough, "What chance do you mean, Mr. Siward?"

"A fighting chance. Can you give it to me?"

"A fighting chance? For what?" very low, very dangerous.

"For you."

Then in spite of her her senses became unsteady. A sudden ringing confusion seemed to deafen her, through which his voice, as if very far away, sounded again:

"Men who are worth a fighting chance ask for it sometimes, but take it always. I take it."

Her pallor faded under the flood of bright color. The blue of her eyes darkened ominously to velvet.

"Mr. Siward," she said very distinctly and slowly, "I am not—even—sorry—for you."

"Then my chance is desperate indeed," he retorted coolly.

"Chance! Do you imagine"— Her anger choked her.

"Are you not a little hard?" he said, paling under his tan. "I suppose women dismissed men more gently—even such a man as I am."

For a full minute she strove to comprehend.

"Such a man as you?" she repeated vaguely. "You mean"— A crimson wave dyed her skin to the temples, and she leaned toward him in horror stricken contrition. "I didn't mean that, Mr. Siward! I—I never thought of that! It had no weight. It was not in my thoughts. I meant only that you had assumed what is unwarranted—that you—your question humiliated me, knowing that I am engaged—knowing me so little—so"—

"Yes, I knew everything. Ask yourself why I risk everything to say this to you? There can be only one answer."

Then, after a long silence, "Have I ever," she began tremblingly—"ever by word or look"—

"No."

"Have I even"—

"No. I've simply discovered how I feel. That's what I was dreaming about when you asked me. I was afraid I might do this too soon, but I meant to do it anyway before it became too late."

"It was too late from the very moment we met, Mr. Siward." And, as he reddened painfully again, she added quickly, "I mean that I had already decided."

And, as he said nothing: "You were a little rough, a little sudden with me, Mr. Siward. Men have asked me that question—several times, but never so soon, so unreasonably soon—never without some preliminary of some sort, so that I could foresee—be more or less prepared. But you gave me no warning. I—if you had I would have known how to be gentle. I—I wish to be now."

Still he said nothing. He sat there listlessly studying the sun spots glowing, waxing, waning, on the carpet of dead leaves at his feet.

"As for what you have said," she added, a little smile curving the sensitive mouth, "it is impulsive, unconsidered, a trifle boyish, Mr. Siward. I pay myself the compliment of your sincerity. It is rather nice to be a girl who can awaken the romance in a man within a day or two's acquaintance. We shall not misunderstand each other again, shall we?"

He raised his head, considering her, forcing the smile to meet her own.

"We shall be better friends than ever," she asserted confidently.

"Yes, better than ever."

"Because what you have done means the nicest sort of friendship, you see. You can't escape its duties and responsibilities now, Mr. Siward. I shall expect you to spend the greater part of your life in devotedly doing things for me. Besides, I am now privileged to worry you with advice. Oh, you have invested me with all sorts of powers now!"

He nodded.

She sprang to her feet, flushed, smiling, a trifle excited.

"Is it all over, and are we the very ideals of friends?" she asked.

"The very ideals."

"You are nice!" she said impulsively, holding out both gloveless hands. He held them, she looking at him very sweetly, very confidently. "And you are content?" persuasively.

"Of course not," he said.

"Then I am sorry for you. Look at that!" turning her left hand in his so that the jewel on the third finger caught the light.

"I see it."

"And yet"—

"And yet."

"That," she observed, with composure, "is sheer obstinacy. How can you really care for me? Do you actually believe that devotion comes like that?"

"Exactly like that."

"So suddenly? It is impossible!" with a twist of her pretty shoulders.

"How did it come to you?" he asked between his teeth.

Then her face grew scarlet, and her eyes grew dark, and her hands contracted in his—tightened, twisted fingers entangled, until, with a little sob, she swayed toward him, and he caught her. An instant, a minute—more perhaps she did not know—she half lay in his arms, her untaught lips close against his. Lassitude, faint consciousness, then tiny shock on shock came the burning revulsion, and her voice came back, too, sounding strangely to her, a colorless, monotonous voice.

She swayed toward him, and he caught her.

He had freed her. She remembered that somebody had asked him to—perhaps herself. That was well. She needed to breathe, to summon strength and common sense, find out what had been done, what reasonless madness she had committed in the half light of

Continued Next Week.